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AUTHOR Charters, Alexander N.
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ABSTRACT

Three issues are of particular interest to adult educators: literacy, the ability to use technology, and the ability to access information. These three areas are significant in terms of individual self-fulfillment, human resource development, and individual and societal development at both national and international levels. One questions whether, in attempting to close the gaps between high and low achievers in these areas, one should aim for equality of opportunity, for achievement, for continuous progress at all levels toward the high achievement end of the continuum, or whether one should treat groups at various stages along the continuum differently. Although some assume that adult education will help to close the gaps that exist between those who are literate, who have technology and the ability to access information, and those who do not, such is not always the case. Many times, education serves to widen the gap. Most participation in adult education programs in the United States is from the 5 percent of the population with the lowest educational level and the 50 percent of the population with the highest educational level. The questions remain: Is there a strong commitment on the part of educators of adults to closing the gaps? Or are some educators of adults acting in a manner to perpetuate these gaps? If so, what is the responsibility of the adult education profession? The answer to that question, partly moral and philosophical, will have an impact on human and national development as well as on the global quality of life. (KC)

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EDUCATORS OF ADULTS AND INFORMATION GAPS

(Literacy, Ability to Use Technology and Access to Information)

Presented at a meeting of the International Adult Education Task Force in San Antonio, Texas U.S.A.

Alexander N. Charters
Professor of Adult Education
Syracuse University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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EDUCATORS OF ADULTS AND INFORMATION GAPS

(Literacy, Ability to Use Technology and Access to Information)

There are several areas such as literacy, the ability to use technology and the ability to access information where high achievement by people is essential to the maximization of progress in society, both nationally and internationally. These issues are all of particular interest to educators of adults.

There is a basic concern relative to these areas that keeps nagging at the conscience of some educators of adults. This concern is that there may be a lack of complete or even strong commitment to progress in these areas by many supporters of adult education and other social movements. In fact, there may be incentives for some to deal quite differently with groups at different levels of accomplishment on a continuum extending from low to high achievement in these areas. Instead of attempting to close the gaps between low and high achievers relative to literacy, use of technology and access to information, some decisions makers in the name of education and some educators of adults act in a manner that perpetuates the gaps.

The rationale used to justify the perpetuation or changes in these gaps may be based on philosophical, moral or pragmatic arguments. The stance may be taken consciously or unconsciously.

The three areas chosen as a focus for the discussion of this concern--literacy, use of technology and access to information--have been identified because they are significant in terms of individual self-fulfillment, human resource development, individual and societal decision making at both

national and international levels.

It may be assumed that gaps in achievement are inevitable because of pervasive characteristics of adults and of societies that lead people to strive for fulfillment not only through their own achievement, but through gaining power over other people and the environment. It may be that all people are born equal but certainly some talents and abilities are inherited, and societies may place different values on them. Assuming even, that they are born equal, human differences begin with the circumstances of birth and are followed immediately by differences in the physical, mental and psychological environment. In reality, all people cannot be assumed to be equal as they relate to each other in the three selected areas.

The concern (question/challenge) is whether, in attempting to close the gaps between high and low achievers in these areas, one should aim for equality of opportunity, for achievement, for continuous progress at all levels toward the high achievement end of the continuum, or whether one should treat groups at various stages along the continuum differently.

Following a brief description of the gaps in the three interrelated areas of literacy, use of technology and access to information, this paper indicates some ways in which adult education influences the extent of the gaps and the rate of progress in closing the gaps.

Literacy

The area of literacy is related to the ability of individuals to deal functionally with the language and other forms of communication in the culture and society in which they live. The gap between the literate and the illiterate people is crucial not only to the development of the individual, but of societies. Even when illiterates learn to read, write and cope, there

is often little to read or opportunity to use the skills learned, especially at basic levels. In general however, when people become at least minimally literate, they are able to build on their literacy skills and continue to learn. The illiterate does not even have the basic tools or skills to continue to learn.

Literacy is fundamental to contemporary cultures and societies because many of the traditions, literature, laws and knowledge are recorded by written language. Access to these resources is fundamental to decision-making and effective functioning in society. The hope is slim to replace this data base by sound or video devices on a mass scale, so society remains dependent on the written word and its citizens' understanding of it.

Technology

Technology is used as part of vocational and professional work. In recent years, the use of technology for day to day operations and transactions of a personal nature has been increasing, especially in the industrial countries. Reference is made to such things as: credit cards; telephone (especially long distance); electronic funds transfer; pocket calculators and home micro-computers. Coupled with them are devices used in education and for learning, such as cassettes, microfilms, microfiche, computers and language machines.

Some of these devices are used as game machines in entertainment places, but they also have an educational purpose. Increasingly more of these devices may be expected to become common in all countries and communities. All of these devices with the software are resources for decision-making. Some of them, such as radio and television do not depend on the written language and provide a meaningful and effective alternative to written communication for the transmission of news and other information. However, none of these

devices are useful to those who do not have the resources to acquire or get access to them or, having acquired them, lack the ability to use them. Insofar as these technological devices provide input to improved decision-making in a society or educational program there is always the temptation to reserve their use to the present decision-makers. Unless these tools can be made accessible to potential as well as current users, progress in closing the gap between effective and ineffective use of technology cannot be made.

The closing of the gap is interrelated with the problem of illiteracy, as the use of many of these technological devices depends on the interpretation of written instructions. So, while millions are still learning to read, others are still at a stage of functional illiteracy as far as use of technology is concerned. Progress out of illiteracy is inhibited by inability to use technological resources to help them out of it.

Access to Information

The accessibility to information is a major component for decision-making. The sheer mass of information that is becoming available is accelerating to such an extent that it only becomes useful to those who have the skill to know how to access it and retrieve it. There is a gap between those persons who have access to information resources and those who do not. If new learners are not given the opportunity to get access to the mass of information and the tools to use it, progress can only be made by those who already know how to access information resources.

Increasingly, information resources are being stored in technological devices. Accordingly, it is necessary to learn how to use these devices in order to access the information. Having a technological device without the basic skills to use them is like having books without the ability to read them.

The mass of information that is available represents a great resource for learning. For an adult to use it effectively means getting access to the appropriate items. Technological devices such as computers have been helpful in making searches of data banks, but even these require learning skills currently out of the reach of the mass of people. It is sometimes called computer literacy. When screening and selection of materials are done by others, the learner is dependent upon the screener. Hence the need for screening limits the degree to which the gap can be closed between those with access to information and those without it.

Maintaining the Status Quo

Before one can address concerns relative to narrowing the gaps in achievement in these areas, it must be recognized that to do nothing will not maintain the status quo but will likely cause the situation to deteriorate. Also, skills must be practiced to remain current and avoid slippage. For example, to continue to be literate and committed in a valid sense, new literates must have appropriate materials to read or they risk reverting to their former status. There must be forward motion just to stay at the same level of accomplishment in each of the three areas.

Narrowing the Gaps

In addressing the concern about how to bring about the closing of the gaps in achievement in the three areas of literacy, use of technology and access to information, the following questions should be asked.

1. Is there a minimum level of achievement which is acceptable for effective and efficient participation in life and which is necessary to preserve certain values of a culture or society?

2. Is there a maximum level of achievement beyond which at a given time in a given place, there is a wastage of human and physical resources?
3. If there is indeed such a minimum and a maximum level of achievement, can these limits help define priorities in the allocation of resources in dealing with the achievement gaps?

These questions provide a basic framework within which to examine the gaps in literacy, use of technology and access to information. If such limits can be defined in a measurable or quantifiable manner or if standards can be set for the evaluation of minimum and maximum levels of achievement, they can serve as guides to the allocation of educational resources in any given society. There may be a minimum level of achievement which must be attained in order for individuals to participate effectively and continue to grow in society. If the resources are not available to achieve this level, then they will be wasted. The choice then becomes one of whether to use the resources for other persons further along the continuum, or to limit the numbers below the minimum in whom resources are invested.

At the other extreme, there may be a level of achievement which in a given society at a given time serves only for self-aggrandizement of the individual and contributes little to development in the society. In such cases, from a societal point of view, resources may be better put to use further down the continuum of achievement in literacy, use of technology and access to information.

Educators of adults are in a good position to conduct the research and perform the analysis necessary to define these limits and make policy recommendations which will maximize the return on the investment of educational resources. It is assumed that the type of evidence that will be acceptable

for setting such limits and standards may vary with each culture or society.

The policies related to closing the gaps are a major consideration to governmental and nongovernmental bodies at both national and international levels. Some governments have set policies which discriminate against minorities such as blacks and women, certain religious groups, ethnic groups, handicapped and underprivileged groups, and even against opppessed majorities. Such policies tend to work against the narrowing of the gaps discussed. At the other end of the continuum, government on occasion may decide to give priority to develop special expertise in the interest of national development to those who are already competent, which may act to widen the gap between those of low and high achievement.

There are also influential people including decision-makers (some of whom may be educators of adults) who by conviction and often for individual gain or self-aggrandizement have interest in maintaining or widening the existing gaps. Before a meaningful plan of action can be implemented, the policies and attitudes of government and decision-makers in any society must be identified and taken into consideration.

In many cases the gaps in literacy, use of technology and access to information complement each other. For example, persons with a high level of literacy may also be the financially affluent as well as the decision-makers. The inability to use technology which relates to low access to information may be associated with the minority groups, such as women. Low levels of achievement in one area have a multiplier effect in a negative direction in the other areas. In contrast, high levels of achievement in one area such as literacy have a multiplier effect in a positive direction in regard to the other two areas of technology use and access to information. The cumulative effect is such that without strong countervailing factors, the gaps will widen, and

societies will tend to be split into two groups of haves and have-nots. Individuals may of course have varying degrees of achievement in the three competencies.

Similar contrasts can be seen between developed and developing countries even when the achievement of persons with the most assets in developed countries is compared to those persons with the most assets in developing countries and the corollary when the achievement of persons with the least assets in developed countries is compared to those persons with least assets in developing countries. Even with minimum access to radio and television, the have-nots see and hear of the difference between themselves and the haves. Without special attention, the gaps between them in the areas of literacy, use of technology and access to information will be widened to the point that they may push to the limits of human tolerance and threaten global peace.

The size of the gaps and the degree of progress toward their elimination also have implications for the progress of individuals as they move from a low point of the need for survival through the stage of minimum ingredients for stable, tolerable physical, social and mental health to a high point of a self-fulfilling life that has the elements and aura of quality. A true commitment to the elimination of these gaps at the national and international levels can lead to the maximization of societies' human and physical resources and the creation of an environment supportive of peace and harmony.

The Role of Adult Education

A fundamental goal of adult education is to assist people to make decisions that give them control of their own destinies and enable them to assist others in joint societal decision-making. Decision making and a sense of control can be expressed in a simple act of marking or not marking an "x," of writing or of printing a name. It must have meaning. It may also be accompanied by

psychological and emotional overtones.

Gaps between groups in society in relation to literacy, use of technology and access to information impede optimal decision-making. Society may impose external restraints on people that prevent the exercise of their power. On the other hand, some people may have internal restraints on their capacity to make decisions. Adults may thus have different degrees of decision-making power in different areas. The limits on it should be self-determined, perhaps by granting the power to other persons who act as representatives through a formal process such as by election, or by consent. Limits on decision-making should not be set by blocking individual achievement in literacy, the use of technology and access to information. It is in assisting the development of decision-making capacity through maximizing opportunities to achieve literacy, use technology, and have access to information that adult education has a role to play.

There seems to be certain basic assumptions in contemporary society that change is inevitable, that we are committed to change and that education can cause change in a desirable direction. These assumptions may not hold true if no effort is made to reduce gaps in educational knowledge and opportunity. The priority given to education as a change agent has been expressed through laws requiring varying degrees of compulsory attendance in school for children. This educational priority is slowly being extended to adults around the globe. The acceptance and even necessity of education for adults is given a sense of urgency by the accelerating rate of change especially in the developing countries. They cannot wait for children to be educated to take up the rights and responsibilities of citizens. Furthermore it must be recognized that educational institutions such as schools and colleges cannot cope with the expanding need and demand. Other governmental and nongovernmental agencies

such as business, military, volunteer groups, labor, must engage the task of providing learning opportunities for adults. The decision-makers and other adults need to be given continuing education here and now.

It is popular to say that all people have the same educational opportunities available to them. This may be the case but it does not mean that they have equal access to education. To have equal access presupposes appropriate and subtler factors such as equal motivation, aspiration, values and attitudes. To make any progress in narrowing the gaps in achievement, learning opportunities must not only be available, but accessible to adults.

A further assumption of most societies is that the education of adults is a process that helps to reduce the gap between low and high achievers. It is not the only factor, but it is a crucial one. Knox concludes, after reviewing and analyzing research on the impact of adult education, that "The evidence is impressive that continuing education programs can have a major impact on performance" (New Directions for Adult Education, 3, 1979, Jossey Bass, p. 117).

Although continuing education may have a major impact on performance, it does not necessarily mean that this performance is narrowing the gaps. Three major studies (Johnston and Rivera, Volunteers for Learning; Dackenwald and Merriam, Adult Education: Foundations for Learning; and Knox and Associates, Administration and Evaluation) indicate that most participation in adult education programs in the United States is by the 5% of the population with the lowest educational level and the 50% of the population with the highest educational level. The indication is that its impact is to widen the gap between high and low achievers.

Educators of adults as well as decision-makers and other persons may ignore the gaps, accept them, or to work to widen, eliminate or narrow them. Their attitudes and commitments are important because they control, to a

large extent, both the policies and procedures for the education of adults. They should as well help to establish minimum and maximum standards for achievers. A clear identification of the mission of educators of adults is important and should be made explicit. It is their professional responsibility to do so.

The influence of educators of adults is expressed through various forms such as consultations, publications, instruction and visitations as well as through the students and staff with whom they work. These activities take place at local, national and international levels in various cultures and countries.

In addition to having influence on instruction, educators of adults have a direct impact on policies and procedures regarding adult education, including the financial arrangements for adult education, the resources accessible for adults, the nature of promotion and recruitment of specific clientele for programs, the appeal and extent of learning opportunities. They thus control the resources that can be utilized to impact the gaps between those with high and low achievement in literacy, high and low ability to use technology and high and low access to information.

The nagging questions re-emerge. Is there a strong, if not complete commitment on the part of professional educators of adults to closing the achievement gaps in the interrelated areas of literacy, use of technology and access to information, not only in their own countries but between developed and developing countries? All three of these areas are crucial to the achievement of the fundamental goal of adult education which is to assist people to make decisions that give them control of their own destinies in this age of exploding information. Or are some educators of adults acting, for whatever their reasons, in a manner to perpetuate the gaps described? If so, what is the responsibility of the profession? Its answer, partly moral and philosophical, will have an impact on human and national development as well as on the global quality of life.

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